

DIET, FAT, CHOLESTEROL, AND YOU

by Estelle Lin

The chuckles echoing out of Lipsett Auditorium Thursday, June 6 were excellent proof that discussions about nutritional health don't always have to be boring. Dr. Gary D. Foster, Ph.D., an Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Clinical Director of the Weight and Eating Disorders Program at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, humorously demonstrated the reality and importance of the seminar topic, *Promoting Healthy Lives: Diet, Fat, and Cholesterol* by asking the audience to share their BMI (Body Mass Index) with the person sitting to their left. He blamed the audience's unenthusiastic response to his proposal on the fact that it is not socially acceptable to be overweight in this culture. Reassuring the audience they were not alone he continued, "If your BMI was greater than 25, you are in good company...61% of Americans are overweight, nearly 27% are obese...and weight confers risk."

The third seminar in the 2002 seminar series sponsored by the Office of Research on Women's Health featured Dr. Frank M. Sacks, M.D., Professor of Cardiovascular Disease Prevention at Harvard School of Public Health and attending physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital; Dr. Pamela Peeke, Assistant Professor of Medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and a Pew Foundation Scholar in Nutrition and Metabolism; and Dr. Foster to tackle the issues encompassing nutrition and cardiovascular disease with a special focus on gender differences.

Dr. Sacks kicked off the seminar presenting *Cholesterol: The Good, the Bad*. "Cholesterol is in our diet but we don't need to eat any since the body can make as much as it needs...in fact if we eat cholesterol, the liver responds by reducing the amount that it makes." As good as it sounds, most people eat a much greater amount of cholesterol than can be compensated by the body. Dr. Sacks also reported, "Epidemiology has really nailed down the relationship between HDL and coronary events...it has found that an increase in HDL of 1 mg/dL is related to a decrease in coronary disease...resulting in a 2 percent decrease in coronary incidence in men and a 3 percent decrease in coronary incidence in women." Noting that many women naturally have higher levels of HDL cholesterol, this promising data suggests not only is HDL a potent positive factor but also shows the biological differences between men and women revealing "low HDL may be more important in cardiovascular disease in women than in men." Dr. Sacks expects that these promising findings will promote future research on the health differences occurring in men and women.

Dr. Foster followed with his entertaining presentation *To diet or not to diet* immediately highlighting the disturbing trend of equating diets with morality. "The culture says, 'Look, obesity is a moral issue.'... People talk about cheating on their diets. You call the somebody a cheater." Dr. Foster points out that it is a health issue and that "It is certainly not nice nor accurate, moreover not effective, to view obesity as some lack of willpower." Although an obesity epidemic exists in the United States, he argues that the nation's obsession with being thin is unrealistic and dangerous.

In contradiction to the cultural message that thin is in, Dr. Foster argued, “The culture offers incentives for gluttony. You get more and more for less and less money.” A Coke bought in the 1950s was 8oz, in the 70s it was 12 oz and in the 90s it was 20 oz. One drink now offers three times the calories in the 90s than in the 50s.” Added Dr. Foster, “We pay a premium on labor saving devices” using drive-thru windows, escalators, and elevators. “In addition to saving time and energy, they save calories.” To combat the obesity epidemic, Dr. Foster advised buying a pedometer and reaching for 10,000 steps a day, increasing by 500 steps a day until accomplishing this goal. His favorite piece of advice? “Small changes last, big changes don’t. Instead of asking...your kids to get something, do something radical and get it yourself.”

Dr. Foster also addressed the latest Atkins diet craze, sharing the results from a small study he completed comparing the Atkins diet to the conventional low-fat diet. The Atkins diet is based on a low carbohydrate intake complemented with a high protein intake. After 26 weeks of the diet, Dr. Foster’s study revealed the Atkins diet showed statistically significant amounts of weight loss and increases in HDL cholesterol levels compared to the conventional diet. According to Dr. Foster these preliminary results merit further investigation of the Atkins diet with a larger sample but, he cautioned, with detailed examinations of its effects on bone density and other related health factors. However, having completed other weight-loss studies, Dr. Foster maintains that a positive self-image will have a much greater impact on a participant than the amount of weight actually lost.

With the energy level of an aerobics instructor, Dr. Peeke’s equally engaging presentation, *Facts About Fat*, covered all that her presentation title promised. “Fat is not bad...somewhere along the line we got persuaded that all fat is bad.” In reality, not all fats are created equal. What vernacular refers to as fat is the form of fat called tryglycerides, which is the major form of fat and primary storage of fat in the body. However, Dr. Peeke reminded, “without fat on board, when you pop that little vitamin E in the morning it’s not going anywhere.”

Dr. Peeke jumped forward explaining how to discriminate among the plethora of food choices. “You have to understand what you’re eating...read the label, it is there for a reason.” She emphasized eliminating scientifically produced products like trans fat, such as margarine, and fat replacements, such as olestra. “Why don’t you just eat normal food...have a small portion of it, enjoy it...and avoid all these science fair projects, which is what they are. These are processed chemicals. We don’t know what they do to the body and we are a little afraid of that.” Equally emphatic she encouraged avoiding fat-free products. “Fat free tastes awful...moreover they exert very potent influences on your insulin because your insulin levels have to go skyrocketing when you have something as simple as a large mountain of sugar.”

Instead, Dr. Peeke championed consuming mono-unsaturated and poly-unsaturated fats such as those found in olive oil, corn, fish, and soybeans. These decrease LDL cholesterol while increasing HDL cholesterol. In addition, she encouraged eating fish or walnuts to fulfill the recommended intake of omega-3 fatty acids due to the many proven health benefits obtained from eating fish just once a week.

Addressing gender differences in nutrition, Dr. Peeke zeroed in on the portion size as one of the main issues women need to be aware of. “The portions are out of control...women are given man-sized portions [at restaurants]...it is difficult to say no when it is tempting and sitting in front of you...make an effort to discriminate and make it into a woman’s food portion.”

The three informative speakers engaged in a brief questions-and-answers session and left the audience with many compelling points to consider. Following Dr. Foster’s example of small changes, Dr. Peeke commented, “It is about accruing physical activity on a routine basis. You have a magnificent campus here...walk around it...You have plenty of stairs...this balance between energy in and energy out will allow us to optimize our body composition so we can extend life, but also by definition, the quality of life.” In closing Dr. Foster recommended, “Think about health, not just weight. It has to be a positive process for yourself and not against yourself. Take your life off hold. Don’t wait to buy new clothes until you lose weight...do those things now.” On top of all the advice and information disseminated that afternoon, Dr. Foster’s final comment summed up what he believes everyone’s underlying motivation for these changes should be. “I take my health seriously and that is why I take my weight seriously.”

To view this seminar or past seminars online, go to <http://videocast.nih.gov>. The ORWH Women’s Health Seminar Series: Women’s Health Research for the 21st Century continues on September 10, 2002 with *Promoting Healthy Lives: Nutrition, Physical Activity and Dietary Supplements* from 1 to 3 p.m. in the Lipsett Amphitheater.